Uplift to Positive Mental Health

University College Cork Peer Mentor Programme

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No one knows how well the shoe fits than the person who wears it

Chinese Proverb

Abstract

University College Cork (UCC) Uplift to Positive Mental Health Programme supports students who experience mental health challenges in the context of higher education. Uplift was designed to train students who experience mental health challenges to be available to support fellow students who experience similar challenges. The unique nature of the programme is its emphasis on students helping students to achieve positive mental wellbeing. The UpLift Programme is a collaborative project between University College Cork (UCC) Disability Support Service and Student Counselling and Development, uLink Peer Support Programme. It is a partnership approach which focuses on the unique contribution that service user and service professional can make in the support of students with mental health challenges in the context of higher education. This paper describes the Uplift to Positive Mental Health Programme in its Pilot Year and Year One. The process of recruitment of mentors and mentees involved in both years is outlined as is the training and support provided to mentors. A description of the evaluation process of the programme is included along with a detailed account of the findings and impact of the programme on mentors and mentees.

Introduction

While peer-led support for students with mental health difficulties is a unique principle, the benefits of peer mentoring are widely researched and verified. Peer mentoring is a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility and mutual agreement of what is helpful. It is about understanding another’s situation empathically through the shared experience (Mead, Hilton & Curtis, 2001). In the context of third level education, peer mentoring provides positive opportunities for students to gain immediate friendships with peers, to access ‘insider’ knowledge of life as a student and to ease anxieties surrounding transition to third level.

Studies have shown that peer mentoring clearly demonstrates the importance of peer relationships for students when coping with college life. Students at-risk of
dropping out of college seek help and advice from their fellow students (McKavanagh, Connor, & West, 1996). Research also demonstrates that the use of peer support programmes increase students’ persistence with study (Clulow & Brennan, 1996), helps them have higher grades (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003) and increases their engagement, satisfaction and retention (Krause, 2005; Krause, 2007).

The concept of peer support in educational settings can take many forms and may include actions such as listening, mentoring, advising, tutoring, group leadership and all supportive activities of an interpersonal nature. The term peer refers to people who have similar expertise or life experiences. The relationship is broadly one of equality and mutual understanding.

The Context

University College Cork and the Disability Support Service are committed to increasing access to higher education for people with disabilities. Since 2002, Diarmuid Ring, Service User Activist/Peer Advocate, in collaboration with Mary O’Grady, Disability Support Officer UCC, provided academic and social support to students with mental health difficulties on a peer/professional basis. The success of this one-to-one holistic endeavour showed students increased engagement with the University, exams success and increased retention.

The UCC Uplift Programme is a peer-led positive mental wellbeing initiative created in response to a 2010 publication: Students with Disabilities Tracking Report – 2005 Intake. The publication highlighted that students with mental health difficulties had the lowest retention rate across all nine third level institutions participating in the study. The report recommended ‘the need to target students with mental health difficulties, particularly in first year, when the highest withdrawals occur’ (Twomey et. al, 2010:39)

An opportunity arose in 2010 whereby Genio sought applications for innovative projects focusing on positively impacting on the lives of people with mental health challenges. Genio is a not-for-profit organisation which aims to accelerate the availability of proven, cost-effective, personalised supports, enabling people with disabilities and mental health difficulties to lead full lives. The UCC Peer Mentor Programme Proposal was one of the successful applications that received funding to help establish and implement the peer-led mentoring for students with mental health challenges.
Objective

The objective of the UCC Peer Mentor Programme is to help students with mental health challenges to become resilient, resourceful and self-determined learners. The programme supports are specifically tailored to enhance academic, personal and social development while attending third level education. The UCC Peer Mentor Programme recruits and trains student volunteers (mentors) to be matched to fellow students (mentees) to whom they provide support throughout the academic year. Mentors are supported in their volunteer role throughout the academic year in the form of regular reflective learning meetings. The UCC Peer Mentor Programme compliments other academic and student supports within UCC.

The additional programme objectives are to:

- Improve retention rate of students with mental health challenges in UCC
- Increase the participants’ self-esteem, self-confidence and self-efficacy
- Increase the participants’ engagement with college life
- Train mentors to support students experiencing mental health challenges
- Provide support to mentors and mentees throughout the process
- Evaluate and document the outcomes and effectiveness of the project

The Programme Outline

The programme currently takes the following structure; recruitment, training, matching, mentor/mentee support meetings and on-going support for mentors in the form of reflective learning meetings as outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Stages In UCC Peer Mentor Process
Mentor Recruitment

The pre-requisite for mentors is they have to be coping with or have experienced a mental health difficulty at some point during their lives. Mentors need to be in UCC for at least one year to enable them to give advice about existing services within UCC and experience of college life, exams and lectures. In the spirit of inclusion, the application process is open to all students who meet the criteria, not simply students who are registered with the Disability Support Service in the University.

Peer Mentor Training

Attendance and commitment to training is a prerequisite to becoming a mentor. It equips students with the necessary skills to become competent in assisting others. The training focuses on preparing mentors through acquiring knowledge and practical skills in an interactive and experiential learning environment.

The training sessions focus on issues of confidentiality, boundaries, empathy, pre-judgements and referrals and qualities needed to be a good mentor. The mentors are encouraged to take part in activities and role plays which demonstrate methods of good practice.

Mentors are required to complete academic training sessions covering general skills such as: time management, study skills, concentration techniques and accessing library resources. Peer mentors are not expected to be academic tutors, however many students experiencing mental health difficulties can find the academic workload stressful and may seek basic advice from mentors.

Training covers the following topics and takes place over three days:

**Table 1. Peer Mentor Training Topics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge of Mental Health Perspectives</th>
<th>Development of Personal Skills and Competencies</th>
<th>Understanding the University Culture/Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bio-Medical Model</td>
<td>Awareness of Peer Mentor Process and Procedures</td>
<td>Knowledge of Support Structures, Services and Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bio-Psychosocial Model</td>
<td>Guidelines for Referral Active Listening Skills</td>
<td>Valuing Diversity &amp; Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovery Model</td>
<td>Respecting Boundaries in Relationships</td>
<td>IT Learning Resources, Academic Support, Reference Material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Mentoring in the Mental Health Context</td>
<td>Understanding Confidentiality</td>
<td>Effective Study Strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCC Mental Health Policy</td>
<td>Practice of Peer Mentoring Skills e.g. role play</td>
<td>UCC Clubs &amp; Societies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Mentor Duties &amp; Responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Matching Process

Perhaps one of the most crucial dimensions affecting the mentoring relationship is the initial matching process. This is not only the most challenging process but also the most deliberated. Once trained, mentors are paired with mentees whom they will support for the academic term. With the use of student preference forms and good judgement, the staff in the Disability Support Service match mentors with mentees. Matching can be based upon course of study, interests, age, gender and/or personality traits. It should be noted that individual diagnoses do not necessarily play a part in the matching process, nor are they disclosed to fellow students at any point throughout the mentoring process. By matching students with similar experiences and backgrounds, the most appropriate support is provided for the mentee.

Student Participation To Date

In 2010/2011 thirteen applicants were successful in progressing to the role as mentor, seven of these mentors continued in their role of supporting students into 2011/2012 when a further six new mentors were recruited. In total, nineteen students have been trained as UCC UpLift mentors. Table 2 highlights the balance of genders, faculties and levels of study represented by these volunteers.

Table 2. Profile of Mentors from Pilot Year and Year One

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MENTOR PROFILE</th>
<th>2010/2011</th>
<th>2011/2012</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Applications Received</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors continuing in their role</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors trained</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Mentors</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Mentors</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Mentors</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate Mentors</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduated Mentors</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors from Humanities</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors from Business and Law</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors from Science and Engineering</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors from Medicine &amp; Health</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A somewhat unexpected yet encouraging aspect of the project was the number of students that participated in the programme who experience cross-disabilities. Students who suffer from physical disabilities, sensory disabilities or specific learning disabilities can also experience mental health challenges. In 2010/2011
and 2011/2012 the UpLift programme was fortunate to have student volunteers with disability categories such as aspergers, vision impairment or dyslexia. These students were invaluable in supporting other students who were managing more than one diagnosis.

**Recruitment of Student Mentees**

Mentees are recruited from the cohort of undergraduate students registered within UCC. Given that the retention rate for students with disabilities in UCC is lowest in year two (Twomey et. al, 2010), a decision was made to make the programme available for all undergraduate students instead of commonly targeted first year students. Students who could benefit from additional support are identified by Disability Support Officer and informed about the programme. In addition to this the campus counselling and medical services recommend the programme to students who they feel can benefit from further support.

**Table 3. Profile of Mentees for Pilot Year and Year One**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MENTEE PROFILE</th>
<th>2010/2011</th>
<th>2011/2012</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Mentees Supported</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentees Continuing in their Role</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentee Progressed to Mentor</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentees Withdrawing from UpLift</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reflective Learning Meetings**

Reflective learning meetings were introduced to the UCC peer mentor programme as a tool to support and advise mentors for the duration of the mentoring process. The reflective process was founded on Gibbs reflective cycle (Gibbs, 1988).

**Reflective Learning Meetings provide the space for mentors to:**

- Reflect on interactions with their mentees
- Share positive and challenging experiences
- Give advice, guidance and encouragement to one another
- Receive support and guidance from the project team

Mentors attend up to eight one hour reflective learning meetings throughout the year. They can also avail of support from the mentor team as and when they need it outside of the meetings.
Evaluation Methodology

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods were used to assess the impact of the UpLift programme on each cohort of mentors and mentees.

Questionnaire

Each participant was asked to complete a questionnaire prior to meeting their mentor/mentee and again at the end of the academic term. The questionnaires captured information on self-esteem, self-efficacy, perception of social support and its impact on stress, confidence and engagement with college life.

Mentoring Log

In addition to completing questionnaires, each mentor was required to keep mentoring log. This log recorded the frequency of meetings with mentees and the type of contact and support they utilised throughout the mentoring process.

Interviews

To supplement the statistical analysis taken from questionnaires and logs, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with mentors and mentees. In 2010/2011, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted.

Findings: Impact and Outcomes of the Programme

The UCC UpLift programme has exceeded its objectives both in the pilot programme and in year one. Both cohorts of students who participated in this programme have experienced positive impacts and have shown a great commitment to the programme. To date, over 177 hours of mentoring has taken
place between almost fifty students. The vast majority of students sought support regarding their health, their study strategies and also their personal concerns. In responding to these needs, mentors provided a listening ear for their mentees and they gave practical information where possible. In table 4 below, the green rows indicate the amount of contact between the mentor and mentee throughout the year. The purple rows signify the type of support sought by mentees and the orange rows highlight the type of support mentors provided.

### Table 4. Mentoring Trends

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MENTORING TRENDS</th>
<th>2010/2011</th>
<th>2011/2012</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Face to Face meetings</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone Calls</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text Messages</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Support</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Support</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCC related Support</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Support</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Concerns</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Concerns</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening Ear</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow up Meeting</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referral</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical Information</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Impact and Outcomes of the Mentoring Programme on Mentees**

The findings of the evaluation have highlighted that this unique programme was successful improving mentees’ retention within the University and enabling mentees to engage more successfully with the academic environment.

In 2010/2011 all thirteen of the mentees who continued to the end of the pilot programme and all of their mentors were retained within the university. Similarly, full retention was achieved amongst student mentees in 2011/2012. Based on the findings of the student tracking report (Twomey et al., 2010) where it was found that the withdrawal rate for students with mental health challenges, on a national level is 44%, this is a remarkable achievement.

**1) Increased Self-Esteem**

The questionnaire results indicate that all the students who were mentored during pilot programme experienced an increase in their self-esteem. The statistical results
were supported by the interview responses of the students in 2011/2012 who said that they felt more confident in their own ability to adapt to student life.

Mentees indicated that they were inspired by the successes and accomplishments of their mentors who had experienced similar mental health challenges and were encouraged to reach their potential despite their mental health challenges. Mentees also felt more comfortable going to college when they knew they had a familiar face to ask for support.

(2) Enhanced Engagement with College Life
In 2010/2011, half of the mentees who participated in the programme enhanced their engagement with college life. Students struggling with their mental health can withdraw from social life on campus when they are experiencing their most challenging times. Meeting a mentor on campus can encourage students to come to college and to feel comfortable being on campus. One mentee said, ‘I did find it hard to make friends last year so it was someone to meet up and have coffee with’ (Mentee, 2012). Table 4 demonstrates that mentors played an important role in responding to student queries by referring them to relevant student services on campus, such as; the students union, student health or student financial services.

(3) Decreased Academic Stress
Statistical results show that almost three quarters of the students being mentored felt that they had reduced their stress levels by the end of the mentoring process. This is a significant finding as academic stress and mental health challenges can often impact and exacerbate one another.

By discussing academic anxieties with mentors, students gained valuable knowledge about time management, study strategies, essay planning and organisation. Mentees also received encouragement to tackle their academic workload efficiently, despite any setbacks they may have experienced. Practical information about how to go about getting essay extensions, splitting exams, repeating and requesting added support such as tutoring can prevent students who are falling behind from permanently terminating their study.

(4) Broader Support Network
Almost 75% of mentees who participated in the pilot programme felt that they had expanded their social support network by the end of the mentoring process. While this support network includes family, friends, professionals and partners, the category which showed the highest degree of improvement during the mentoring
process was the category of friendship. Mentees often felt that their mentor was a good friend despite the fact that mentoring was a somewhat formal arrangement; ‘I always felt good after meeting my mentor, she was very positive and affirming with me that I was doing okay. I looked forward to meeting her. I talked really honestly with her and I trusted her’ (Mentee, 2011).

(5) Increased Self-Efficacy
By the end of the mentoring process in 2010/2011, the questionnaires show that more than three quarters of students felt more academically capable and able to cope with their college workload such as essays, exams and lectures. They also felt that they were more confident in approaching lecturers and tutors to enquire about assignments and exams. This not only eased stress it enhanced their self-confidence and self-efficacy.

Impact and Outcomes of the Mentoring Programme on Mentors

(1) Development of new Skills
Through compulsory participation in a comprehensive training programme, mentors gained important new skills such as communication skills, knowledge about referral services, interpersonal skills and confidentiality awareness. The training gave mentors the self-confidence they need to be able to support other students. Some mentors became more familiar with their own approach to mentoring. One mentor highlighted his personal learning; ‘on a personal level I learned more about myself and my own boundaries. I learned about how to establish them and maintain them. It’s always tough to get the balance so that was learning for me’ (Mentor, 2012).

(2) Positive Personal Development
Interviews in both 2010/2011 and 2011/2012 revealed that mentors experienced huge personal development. They felt on a personal level that they got more than they expected from the mentoring process. For instance, one mentor pointed out that mentoring was a good reminder for him that mental health is an on-going challenge that he was reminded not to take for granted. Others learned that mentoring, reflection and sharing was a therapeutic experience for them because they were not concentrating on their own mental health in the process.

(3) Broader Social Network
Participation in training and reflective learning meetings increased mentors contact with others who were positively managing their mental health. This increased the mentors social support network. In total, 44% of the mentors increased or
maintained their social support network in 2011/2012. Mentors felt part of a supportive group and they felt that they were making a difference.

(4) Sense of Accomplishment
In interviews mentors highlighted that they felt a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment by being able to offer support to fellow students. The sense of accomplishment that mentors noted in interviews was enhanced by mentees who showed gratitude to mentors for their time and their friendship.

(5) Increased Self-Esteem
The quantitative tracking of mentors progress in 2011/2012 shows that 67% of mentors improved or maintained their self-esteem. It should be noted that 78% of the students who applied to be mentors for the UpLift programme had higher than average self-esteem when they started mentoring. That is, before they started mentoring in 2011/2012, 78% of mentors scored twenty-two or higher on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. This is a good reflection on the UpLift team who recruited exceptionally confident and capable students to mentor others.

(6) Decreased Academic Stress
Questionnaires show that 67% of mentors in 2011/2012 reduced their stress levels by the end of the mentoring programme. Mentors revealed that they gained a greater awareness of their own learning strategies. Questionnaires also revealed that 56% of mentors maintained or improved their attitude towards education. Mentors noted that advising others on study strategies and organisation encouraged them to tackle their own workload in a more positive and efficient manner.
The UCC UpLift Model

The defining philosophy of the UCC service user model is a student centred approach to mental health support which is grounded by the recovery approach to mental health. Building on this philosophy, the UpLift peer mentoring model has a number of key features which include;

1. Service users have a key role to play in the planning and developing of the programme.
2. Services work in partnership with the service user to create university wide support services.
3. The voluntary nature of the programme supports empowering relationships, based on trust, understanding and respect.
4. The Collaborative model is based on negotiation, dialogue and reflective action.
5. Outcomes are measured in terms of the perceived benefits of the service users.
6. Responsibility and support is given to students who are coping with mental health challenges.
7. A feedback loop system is an essential operating principle between staff, mentors and mentees participating in the programme.

The evaluation, which encompasses feedback from mentors, mentees and staff, clearly demonstrates that the model works. For the vast majority of participants, the peer-led mentoring model improved the quality of their third level experience and provided essential support during times of difficulty.

The Uplift to Positive Mental Health has enormous potential to be adapted and applied in different contexts. This potential varies widely, for instance; the model could be transferred to other Higher Education Institutes who are seeking to support their students with mental health difficulties. In educational settings such as universities, institutes of technology and colleges of further education this model could be seen as a great resource for incoming students. Similarly, the peer-led mentoring model could be successfully adapted to generate tailored support for students with cross-disabilities.

Finally, the UpLift model could be expanded and developed to assist students with mental health difficulties in their transition to employment. Collaborative partnerships between employers, students and support staff could be forged to enhance the student’s employability and encourage a smooth transition from education to employment.
Biographical Information

**Aimie Brennan** is a final year PhD candidate and researcher in the Department of Sociology, UCC. Aimie’s contribution to the ‘Students with Disabilities Tracking Report – 2005 Intake’ led her to become involved in the UCC peer mentoring programme in 2010. In conjunction with Dr. Denis Staunton, Aimie has designed and implemented a three year evaluation of the UpLift to Mental Health Programme (2010-2013). The evaluation report is currently underway and a final report will be available in September 2013.

**Diarmaid Ring** is a mental health service user/activist with extensive experience in peer advocacy. Diarmaid has spent twelve years working with the Disability Support Service in University College Cork providing peer academic mentoring to students with mental health difficulties. Diarmaid was the first service user to be ministerially appointed to the inaugural Mental Health Commission in 2001 and has lectured extensively on mental health issues and recovery orientated practices worldwide.

**Claire Dunne** is a Counselling Psychologist and Coordinator of the Peer Assisted Student Support (PASS) programme in University College Cork run through Student Counselling and Development. The PASS programme includes the student-to-student support services, uLink Peer Support and Niteline. Claire works with the rest of the Uplift to Positive Mental Health Team to deliver the Uplift programme.

**Dr Denis Staunton** has been involved in the field of education for the past thirty years at community level, in the informal learning community-based setting and in the formal third-level education sector. Denis has worked in University College Cork in a number of different roles including teaching in the Department of Applied Social Studies; designing and developing adult education programmes through the Centre for Adult Continuing Education and as Director of Access with responsibility for widening participation for previously excluded groups – socio-economically disadvantaged school leavers, mature students and people with disabilities. Dr Staunton has carried out research and written about youth and community, adult education and social policy. He has just written a new book: *Going to College as a Mature Student: the next step in your Academic Journey*, published in 2012 by the Centre for Adult Continuing Education, UCC.
Bibliography


